

The Parables of Jesus

WEEK 5: LECTURE OUTLINE

LOST SHEEP, LOST COINS, LOST SONS (LUKE 15)

DIFFERENT FROM WHERE WE'VE BEEN BEFORE

- These parables don't tend to trouble people. These are parables people tend to "like."
- But there may be more to these parables than meets the eye, especially in *how they work together*.

LUKE'S NARRATIVE ARTISTRY

- These parables are united by a common theme.
 - The Lost Sheep (15:3-7)
 - The Lost Coin (15:8-10)
 - The Lost Son(s) (15:11-32)
- All three parables are told in response to the setting of vv.1-2:
 - "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" Therefore, he spoke to them this parable.
 - Did Luke forget that Jesus told *three* parables?
 - Perhaps Luke sees these as a unit that constitutes a *single parable*, all in response to the complaint of the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners.
- The parables are *ordered* to form a climax:
 - One lost sheep out of 100: a 1% sheep problem.
 - One lost coin out of 10: a 10% coin problem.
 - One lost son out of two: a 50% human problem – and not just human beings, but children.
- The parables *require* the listener's involvement:
 - Negative Rhetorical Questions: "Which one of you does not . . .?"
 - The answer: "No one does not!" "Everyone would do what these people do!"

THE EXPERIENCE OF LOST THINGS

- Jesus exploits the *pathos* of having lost something.
 - A person who has lost something can only think of the thing that he or she has lost.
 - Upon finding that which has been lost, there must be a celebration!
- This is a natural, almost universal human experience.
- In this way, the parables draw a direct comparison between these stories and the disposition of heaven.
 - Just as humans naturally and inevitably can't help but rejoice in what they find, God and his angels rejoice over the finding of a lost sinner.

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- The shepherd, the woman, and the father in the parables are (limited) images of God.
- Jesus is saying – to the tax collectors and sinners – “This is how much God loves you: he ‘loses his mind’ until he finds you!”
- Jesus is saying – to the Pharisees and scribes – “You won’t understand why I eat with tax collectors and sinners until you understand that God is preoccupied with lost persons.”

IMAGES DRAWN FROM COMMON LIFE

- An early divestment of inheritance:
 - The younger son asks for one-third of his father’s *bios* – his “life” or “life’s work.” This is *personal*.
 - The younger son’s action is equivalent to saying, “I wish you were dead.”
 - He chooses to sever ties with his father and family.
- An ancient, Jewish family’s worst nightmare:
 - The younger son goes into a “far country,” implying a Gentile country.
 - He “squanders” his inheritance in “loose living” – drunkenness, immorality, licentiousness, irresponsibility.
 - He becomes an indentured servant to an unclean Gentile.
 - He becomes a servant to the unclean swine, whom he envies.

WHY DOES THE SON RETURN HOME?

- Verses 7 and 10 describe repentant sinners; does the younger son repent?
- Think back to the other Lukan parables we’ve read, where characters talk to themselves.
 - The judge talks to himself and decides to grant the widow justice for the sake of his reputation.
 - The unjust steward talks to himself and figures out how to be as shrewd as possible.
 - The younger son of this parable does the same thing.
- Consider vv.17-19: the son resolves to work his way back into his father’s household as a slave.

THE WATCHFUL, HASTENING FATHER

- Not an incidental detail: “But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him.” How is this possible?:
 - The father has been “on the lookout.”
 - He has compassion and “running he fell upon his neck and repeatedly kissed him.”
 - This is a father “out of control” at finding his lost son.

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- How can we understand these actions of the father more deeply?
 - Ancient writers (e.g., Aristotle, Ben Sirach) saw running as a mark of low status. The father's act of running should stand out to us as peculiar.
 - One speculation (from Kenneth Bailey):
 - ♦ Was the *qeşaşah* taking place? This was a symbolic act performed by villagers in solidarity with a family that had been shamed, signaling that the one who had shamed the family was unwelcome and not to return.
 - ♦ The villagers may have met the returning son to shame him in solidarity with the father.
 - ♦ *Perhaps* the father watches and runs in order "to get there first."
 - ♦ Thus, the father shames himself so that the son will not be shamed.
 - ♦ In such an interpretation, could we see something of the cross of Jesus Christ, who shames himself so that we would not be shamed?

THE SPEECH THAT THE SON DIDN'T HAVE TO GIVE

- Earliest manuscripts do not include the whole speech the son had prepared.
- One of two things may have happened:
 - The father has stopped the son mid-speech.
 - The son, in the face of the father's accepting love, realizes he doesn't need to finish the speech – it is unnecessary in the face of his loving father.

THE GIFTS OF THE FATHER

- The father gives the son the "best robe," which is perhaps his own.
 - Compare this with Isaiah 61:10: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness."
 - This signifies restoration.
- The father gives him a ring, perhaps a signet ring, signifying that he is reinstated into the family.
- The father places shoes on his feet, distinguishing him from slaves (who would not have worn shoes).
- The father kills the fatted calf and celebrates, without demand for restitution.
 - The pattern is thus the same as the first two parables.
 - What was lost is found – what else is there to do but celebrate?

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FROM “FOUND” TO “ALIVE”

- The “lost and found” motif is now recast in terms of “life and death.”
- There is a higher emotional content to this parable than with the previous two.
- This story is now a human story that provides an intimate window into God himself.

BUT THAT’S NOT ALL!

- Wouldn’t this be a good place to end the parable?
- Yet it continues to move forward beyond a “satisfactory” ending (v.24) to the dilemma of the “older son” (vv.25-32).
 - We can now see all three parables (told as a single response to the setting of vv.1-2) as preparing for the depiction of the older son.
 - Both sons have something to say to a respective audience:
 - ♦ Tax collectors and sinners encounter the loving father in the form of the younger son who says, “Your God embraces you, even though you shamed him. He receives you as his children.”
 - ♦ Pharisees and scribes can see themselves in the older son, rejecting his brother (the tax collectors and sinners) and thereby becoming estranged from his father (God), who longs to be reconciled to *all* of his children (tax collectors and Pharisees, sinners and scribes).
- The Pharisees and scribes find themselves directly confronted by this “epilogue,” as it calls into question their assumptions about God and their own actions in light of those assumptions.
 - They believed God would condemn “tax collectors and sinners.”
 - But the God revealed to them in Jesus embraces those very people and says, “These are my children, your brothers, and sisters. Will you embrace them, too?”

RETITLING THE PARABLE

- The Parable of the Prodigal Son?
 - How often do you use the word “prodigal” when not referring to this parable?
 - We often think of “prodigal” as meaning *wayward*, or as *having gone away*.
 - But such a title (“of the Prodigal Son”) makes no mention of the father, who seems to be the more prominent focus of our attention.
- The Parable of the Prodigal Father
 - “Prodigal” doesn’t mean immoral; it means “excessive, unrestrained, extravagant” – over the top.
 - The “prodigal” in this parable is the prodigally loving father.
 - This is the God whom Jesus Christ reveals to us.